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VITUPERATION IN POLITICS.

IN an ideal method of popular government candidates for office would be selected for their faculty for public business, their good sense, their probity, and their proved purpose to sacrifice personal interests and ambition to a constitutional and impartial administration of their trust; the ordinary presumption being that they who are least anxious for the office are worthiest of the trust. An election campaign would consist of a temperate discussion, addressed to the intelligence of the people, of any questions of statesmanship and policy involved in the pending issue, with only such criticism of the private character of the candidate as might relate to his convictions and qualifications in those particulars. The election itself would then be a fair expression, under the provisions of law, of the choice of every citizen entitled to suffrage. Whatever capacities or accomplishments, virtues or graces, might be found in the candidate beyond the mark thus designated, must be regarded as advantages rather than as essentials to his fitness; and whatever defects he might have in other respects would be occasions of understood regret rather than subjects for gratuitous gossip or public attack. It is assumed that moral decency

is included in "probity." It is also assumed that experience has shown political parties to be a general convenience for carrying on the practical operations of the governmental system. They are not the creature of the state, but of exigencies in the state that may be local or transient. They are a foe to good government when they substitute subordinate ends for the order and welfare of society; they are a usurpation when they invade personal independence of thought or action; they are unpatriotic when they coerce political conduct to the damage of personal manhood; and they are an impertinence when they undertake to dictate to the judgment or conscience of the individual voter.

Vituperation in politics is largely due to party in politics. All the personal animosities between politicians in the whole country would not go very far to produce the venom discharged from press and platform in the course of a presidential election; nor would it be distilled or diffused to any considerable extent by the mere heating and antagonizing force of differences of opinion on great matters of public concern. It is true that some of these, pertaining to both domestic and foreign policy, so affect material industries and profits as to engage passion as well as reason and arouse a polemical temper. Regarded, however, purely as subjects of national legislation, or as studies in political economy, it cannot be supposed that State rights and federal centralization, internal revenue or improvements, the tariff or the currency, could ever provoke more than a moderate amount of angry abuse. Into other questions, like slavery, repudiation, Mormonism, and the regulation of the sale of liquors, a moral sentiment enters that is not unlikely to find vent in immoral speech. Yet it can hardly be doubted that reasonable limits would be set to all this sort of evil but for the instigation of that peculiar element in the social nature which we call party-spirit. It is one of the ways in which man in combinations is worse than man by himself. Just as zeal for a sect in religion substitutes itself for faith in the Original of all religious light and life, becoming at once provincial and quarrelsome, so servitude to a political party, with all its behests and devices, displaces loyalty to the supreme seat of truth and right in the nation, and is fatal to patriotism. Party is made a power of itself, irrespective of the principle that created it, standing somewhere between the sphere of personal accountability and the law of the land. It takes on authority, claims rights, issues

commands, exercises privileges. Among the latter is the liberty of hatred and misrepresentation, the privilege of being a common scold. Here is an advocate before an unsworn bench and jury, unrestrained by the decencies of the court-room. What wonder if it sometimes sinks to vulgarity? If it is said that these dangers are obviated by the circumstance that parties are set over against one another, so that they neutralize each other's wrongs, there is nevertheless a residuum of mischief, apart from the question directly in hand, in an injury done to the manners and character of the people. Without pretending that politics can be altogether detached from parties, thoughtful men, in proportion as they are patriotic, will weigh that injury.

In view of the magnitude of this evil, as lately shown in the United States, one casts about in a spirit of judicial fairness to find some possible palliation. Allow, then, that in the masculine encounters of debate hard blows must be given and taken, that robust contestants cannot always be expected to glove their hands or polish their blades, and that wounded sensibilities are not to complain if the campaign does not always move

"To the Dorian mood
Of flutes and soft recorders."

Allow also that, under the glamour of the strife, to the eye of his opponent a candidate for office is partially dehumanized and passes for the time into the order of insensates. Allow, further, that there is a widely accepted theory that, except for the immediate political purpose, the objurgative language is divested of its usually offensive meaning, being by common consent canceled after election. These extenuations are admissible; but they are, after all, much too slender to save the vituperative habit from being an abomination.

As most germane to the subject-matter, among the counts of this reproach stands first a degradation of the business of government itself. Inevitably men recognize a reciprocal relation between high place and him who holds it, between rule and ruler, between official authority and the personage wielding it. Republics have not yet exterminated the reverence that hedges about the person of a sovereign, nor is it best that, while changing the names and forms of power, they should abolish this salutary respect. Whatever lowers the height or cheapens the dignity of the chief—emperor or president—touches the

sanctity of law and impairs the awfulness of its execution, so long as the higher instincts of mankind continue as they are. Despotie Cæsars or criminal presidents may have to be reckoned with terribly in the name of justice or liberty ; but even regicide and impeachment ought to be managed with a certain decorum. "Honor the king." Little service is done to history or morality by pictures of the vices and foibles of crown or court. Scott's capital representation of the weakness of royalty, in the "Fortunes of Nigel," hardly leaves the sweet taste in the mouth with which one ordinarily turns from his pages. If an empire is dishonored with its throne, so is a democracy with its leaders ; and there are better ways of making such leaders what they ought to be than vilifying their reputations. St. Paul was writing for the subjects of no particular kind of government, and like both a statesman and a gentleman, no less than an apostle, when he directed one of his juniors : "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers," as if political vituperation were the very thing he had in mind.

The standing of the presidency itself before the world, whether or not it is loftier than any kingship, has not been elevated by the canvass just closed, for ribaldry can elevate nothing. Whichever of the principal candidates might have prevailed, it must take more than four years of blameless living and administrative integrity to clear him of all marks and memories of the needless smirches with which ferocious pens and a prostituted art have blotted his name. Coarsely done or cleverly done, that cruel business has now, so soon, no approval in the conscience or kind-heartedness of the doers. It is even doubtful if the letters of Junius, unique contribution as they were to literature, classical as their invective is, raised the tone of British public life, or really changed the general estimate of North or Mansfield, Lord Granby or the Duke of Grafton. What shall be said of the lampoons of London, Paris, and New York ? In this country, more than in any on earth, each citizen has a vital share in the common stock of national credit ; here is a universal motive for the maintenance of that credit, and one means of maintaining it is to be jealous of the good repute of its chosen representatives. How much the political character of the country suffers from the ordeal of defamation to which all candidates for elective offices are exposed, begins to

appear. A well-bred and self-respecting person need not be very fastidious to decline a race where the prize, if gained, is no offset to the bespattering on the course; or a post where his service to his constituents must be crippled by the malign falsehoods heaped on him before he reaches it. At almost any time in the past thirty years there have been statesmen and scholars in these States, whose names could be easily spoken, and enough of them to furnish a cabinet, if not a senate, who have silently preferred a clean retirement to a calumnious publicity. Neither property nor education, commerce nor manufactures, legislature nor judiciary, can afford to dispense with the strongest minds and ripest wisdom at the reckless pleasure of a few unscrupulous orators, editors, or preachers. It may be answered, that brave men should be equal to martyrdom. We are not dealing at present with the victims, but with the tormentors. During the presidential struggle ending in 1868 the writer of this was in conversation in Massachusetts with one of the most earnest and successful ministers in the land, who lived in one of the Middle States, and had extensive opportunities to know men as well as things accurately. Mention being casually made of Horatio Seymour, whose name was then before the people, the minister said, speaking without the least hesitation, positively and emphatically: "Mr. Seymour, sir, is a bad man; I refer not to his politics, but to his character. He is a copperhead, to be sure; but that is not what I mean now. He is a thoroughly bad man." Not many months afterward the hearer of this perfectly sincere slander had abundant knowledge that Mr. Seymour's private life was and had been as nearly faultless as that of any Christian man within his acquaintance, and that the confidence reposed in him by those who knew him was absolute and unbounded.

Other lines of life furnish no parallel to this traducement. In parliamentary assemblies, at the bar, on the exchange, on the street, in all the intercourse of civilized communities, a common law of civility condemns and restrains even personalities that are not slanderous, much more scurrility. Neighbors or strangers are not apt to assail each other rancorously with tongue or types on account of divergences of opinion on other subjects; and yet those differences continually divide men, as to their real interests, far more widely than almost any in politics. How is it that so rational an undertaking as a choice of rulers opens the sluice-ways? What can be the secret of

this affinity for poison in the process of reducing to practice a theory of political economy? Why should the fact that the friends of a fellow-citizen have thought him worthy to take up a grave and august duty suddenly develop the brutal side of our constitution, stimulate the relish for human vivisection, uncover again in the highest type the claws and stings of inferior animals, and rouse in mild-mannered husbands and fathers, sitting at desks or standing on platforms, the savagery that has been slumbering since the days of Hengist and Horsa? It looks like an exception to the unities of nature. It is a puzzle that might well exercise the wits of the masters of journalism for four years to come, North and South, East and West. A story of Samuel Ward, the "Sam Ward" of English dinner-tables, "the most perfect gentleman of either hemisphere," is pertinent. In a company of clever people, who were talking of horses, as Englishmen occasionally do after dinner, Professor Huxley observed that the modern horse is without question a descendant of the ancient mesohippus; to which remark Mr. Ward replied that it was very sad, but "the scandal never would have come out if the horse hadn't been running for something."

Suppose we apply a test of sincerity. The struggle of 1884 has been attended with an unprecedented display of moral sensibility in two directions; in fact, it has created an original moral classification. As a singular effect of the nominations, it has been discovered that all Republicans have an intense horror of personal impurity, and that all Democrats abominate fraud and falsehood. That there should be just this uniform coincidence between the line dividing two great political parties and the line between two familiar forms of iniquity is what no sagacity could have foreseen. What can be the hidden tie between free trade and veracity, or chastity and protection? The two parties committed themselves on the ethical issue with a distinctness and emphasis that could leave no manner of misunderstanding. They declared themselves in every possible way in which opinion and conviction and passion can be expressed. What must follow? Whichever candidate was elected we should expect to see a new era of cleanliness and integrity. As the vote was close, just about one-half of the nation hereafter will be faultlessly chaste, and the other half incorruptibly honest. Dissolute or sensual Republicans —

whether editors, publishers, speech-makers, or office-holders — will be patterns of domestic virtue. Lying, sordid, unscrupulous Democrats will disappear. People will say of man or woman, "He is as trustworthy as a Democrat," or "She is as modest as a Republican." The city of Washington will be transformed, unless the country has been for four months the theater of hypocrisy, and the canvass a din of "sound and fury signifying nothing."

Something might be said of the insult put by the scurrilous style of political controversy upon the cause of good letters. Literary purity in America has many perils. Not the least of them lies in the rapidity and immensity of composition and declamation in our periodical elections. Newspaper writing favors some rhetorical merits, notably energy, conciseness, and vividness; and we have some fine specimens of editorial ability. It cannot be believed that the masters in that responsible calling will permit the disgraceful mistakes of the past year to be repeated. They will hardly consent, by constant extravagance of epithets and expletives in personal and partisan detraction, to destroy actual distinctions, to submerge the lights and shades of language under an effusion of words so superlative as to be meaningless, or to disfigure their style with slang. It would seem reasonable to hope that a corresponding standard of taste, if not the rule of right, must forbid intrusion into those private quarters where either the bad traits imputed do not touch the administration of the office for which the candidate is set up, or where condemnation cannot be justified till a judicial tribunal has pronounced sentence. The Almighty has often used rough instruments for rough work, thrashing guilty nations with jagged flails; but he reserves the ultimate judgment of men to his own omniscience.

Apologies have been sometimes made for profane swearing, on the ground that a sound of strength in it carries compulsion, commanding obedience on the part of minds so low as to be insensible to any decorous address. Some such pretext may be thought to excuse violence or acerbity in polemics. It is a flimsy defense, and it puts an undeserved contempt on even the worst of our kind. Men of any intellectual or moral rank whatever are not convinced or converted or corrected by wrath. They who are farthest astray or farthest down will see through the shallowness of those opponents who vilify only because they are

vile, or use filth to fight with because they have no other ammunition. But charity forbids us to vituperate even the vituperators. To a degree deplorable and extraordinary we have had a political campaign of dirt and disgust. Let the dirt fall to dirt. The disgust ought to remain to admonish us when the temptation returns. Nobody is the better, wiser, happier for all the scandals. Were there any actual service to any party in obloquy, the benefit on one side would offset the benefit on the other, like two successive torch-light processions with their pyrotechnics, leaving nothing but a bad smell in the air. It is not well to be reading every day, for four or five months, columns of the most explicit and dogmatic accusations, which at best make only an impression of unreality, exciting a frequent suspicion that we are being fooled, and, for the time, expelling from the mind every generous sentiment and every noble thought. According to their natural or acquired moral aversions, men and women will feel special indignation either at sins of the will or sins of impulse, at rapacity or lust, at Marlborough or William Wycherley, at Sunderland or Henry Sidney. It will be safe to allow history and God to make up the final award for each of them. It will not be safe at all to construct standards of moral judgment out of our partisan predilections, or to let political prejudice instead of certified evidence determine our utterances about the living or the dead.

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